
Humour to facilitate meaningful learning in nursing education as experienced by learner nurses

Mary Chabeli, Jackie Malesela and
Monica Rasepae

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of learner nurses regarding the use of humour in facilitating learning in order to formulate guidelines to facilitate the integration of humour in nursing education. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. A non probability sampling method was used to select 70 participants in three Higher Education Institutions. Six focus group interviews were conducted. The qualitative method of data analysis was used. Trustworthiness was ensured and ethical standards were observed.

Three main themes emerged: positive effects, negative effects and the absence of humour. The sub-themes of positive effects of humour indicated a psycho-physiological effect, social effect and cognitive effect. The sub-themes of the negative effect of humour indicated that inappropriate humour distracts learners from learning, and racist jokes result in a loss of interest in learning while the absence of humour creates a tense learning environment. Recommendations are given.

Introduction

Humour, as defined by Billings and Halstead (2009), is the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is comical or funny; the quality of being laughable or comical; funniness. Humour can be expressed in various ways. It can be anything that amuses or creates a positive feeling. A person expresses humour with the intention that it will be appreciated by the receiver. However, the receiver's perception of humour may not accord with that of the person expressing the humour or vice versa (Quinn and Hughes, 2013).

Background to the need for humour as an educational strategy to promote learning

From the inception of formal nursing education during the Florence Nightingale period (1861 to 1914), the nature of nursing education is reputed to have been purely religious (Attewell, 1999). Training at the Nightingale School of Nursing at St Thomas hospital was subject to strict discipline. Character training and moral standards were emphasised, and nursing students lived in nurses' homes under strict supervision. This serious approach to learning terrified learner nurses and made them scared to practice the skills that needed to be mastered, thus negatively affecting their learning (Mellish, Brink and Paton, 1998). Taking into consideration the historically stringent background of nursing education and the seriousness of nursing as a profession, facilitation of teaching and learning need to be revisited in order to make learning enjoyable.

Humour can be used to provide welcome relief in a tense class. Humour can also be used to emphasise and clarify important points, thus increasing understanding and retention (Billings and Halstead, 2009). A humorous stimulus is perceived or recognised differently by people and not all learner nurses are therefore able to recognise a humorous stimulus as presented by the nurse educator. Learners may get distracted or offended by the use of humour owing to their understanding of the language (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, 2011). On the other hand, nurse educators should use humour effectively in facilitating learning so as to develop the learners' sense of humour, which is also expected in clinical practice, where a climate of acceptance, support, trust and freedom of expression should be created (Quinn and Hughes, 2013). Humour will be effective only if learner nurses, as the people at whom the humour is directed, can recognise it as a facilitative instructional approach. However, its didactic validity to promote learning needs continued exploration, and guidelines need to be laid down for the teacher who has to utilise the method (Fraser, Loubser and Van Rooy 1993).

The aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of learner nurses regarding the effects of humour in facilitating learning in three higher education institutions in Gauteng.

Research design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used (Burns and Grove, 2009). This approach enabled the researcher to explore and describe the meaning of the experiences of learner nurses regarding the effects of humour in facilitating learning at a nursing education institution in Gauteng.

Methodology

Study population and sampling

The population consisted of 638 final-year learner nurses registered for a Diploma in Nursing during 2011 in all three nursing education institutions (NEIs) in Gauteng. A non probability purposive sampling method (Burns and Grove, 2009) was used. Of these learners 232 were from NEI (A), where 26 learners volunteered to participate. NEI (B) had 205 learner nurses and 20 of them volunteered to participate, while NEI (C) had 201 learners, 24 of whom volunteered to participate in the study, leading to a total of 70 learners taking part. Ethical considerations were observed using the ethical standards of the Democratic Nurses Organization of South Africa's (DENOSA, 2005).

Ethical Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for data collection and for the use of a tape recorder after an explanation of the purpose and method of the study (DENOSA, 2005). Participants used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Confidentiality was ensured through the safe-keeping of audio-taped interviews and transcriptions. Participation was voluntary, and ethical clearance was granted by the University of Johannesburg's Higher Degrees and Ethics Committee. Permission was also granted by the management of the participating nursing colleges before the commencement of the data collection.

Data collection

Six phenomenological focus group interviews were conducted Krueger and Casey (2009) in the three NEIs from a total sample of 70 final-year learner nurses on theory block within three days. Two focus group interviews consisting of 10 and 16 participants were conducted in NEI (A), while two focus group interviews of 10 participants in each group were conducted in NEI (B). The last two focus group interviews consisting of 14 and 10 participants were conducted in NEI (C). The interviews were conducted in English which is understood by both the interviewer and interviewees. The researcher asked open-ended research questions Burns and Grove (2009) to direct the study, namely, “How did you experience the use of humour as a method to facilitate learning”. Facilitative interview skills were used to elicit in-depth information about the experiences of learner nurses regarding the use of humour to facilitate learning. Responses were tape-recorded to ensure that the data-collection and data-transcription processes were accurate (Plano, Clark and Creswell, 2010). Field notes were taken during the interviews to enrich the data collected. The researcher continued questioning until data saturation was reached (Brink, 2001).

Data analysis

Data was analysed using Tesch’s qualitative open-coding method of data analysis (in Creswell, 2012). Open-coding refers to the labelling of words and phrases found in the transcripts or text (Creswell, 2012). It is about using the data to generate conceptual labels and categories for use in theory building (Punch, 2009). The researcher engaged a co-coder to analyse data independently in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Field notes were taken into consideration during data analysis. A list of emerging themes and sub-themes were then developed. Significant statements were extracted and categorised into thematic clusters to be used as citations in the description of findings. Findings were integrated into a thick, exhaustive description to cover all possibilities of the experiences. A consensus discussion meeting was held between the researcher and the co-coder to reach an agreement on the independently identified categories. Follow-up individual interviews with five purposely selected participants in the three NEIs were conducted to verify the accuracy of the identified categories in order to ensure trustworthiness through member checking.

Trustworthiness

Rigor was attained by attending to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In order to ensure the credibility and confirmability of the study the strategies applied were prolonged engagement, triangulation and member-checking. To augment the study's transferability, that is, the degree to which the results of the study can be generalised to settings other than the ones studied (Brink, 2001), the researcher incorporated a comprehensive description of vivid quotes into the study's findings. The study's dependability was enhanced by thorough description of the methodology used by the researcher in the study.

Findings and discussion

The findings revealed positive effects, negative effects, effects of absence of humour. Sub-themes of positive effect of humour indicated: a psycho-physiological effect, social effect and cognitive effect. Sub-themes of negative effects of humour indicated that inappropriate use of humour hinders learning. Too much humour distracts learning, and racist jokes result in a loss of interest in learning. The absence of humour, on the other hand, creates a tense learning environment resulting in decreased learner participation (table 1).

Table 1: Experiences of learner nurses with regard to the effect of humour in facilitating learning

MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES	RELATED CATEGORIES
Positive effects of humour		
Psych-physiological effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help cope with stress, tension and anxiety • Stimulates the release of endorphins • Alleviates depression and enhances the well-being of learners 	
Social effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish professional relationships • As an ice breaker • Create a relaxed non-threatening learning environment 	
Cognitive effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates comprehension • Assist in problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate processing of new information • Simplify difficult concepts • Make meaningful association • Promote creative and divergent thinking • Promote theory and practice integration
Negative effects of humour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much humour distracts learners from learning • Racist jokes result in a loss of interest in learning 	
Effects of an absence of humour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a tense learning environment resulting in decreased learner participation 	

Positive effects

Psycho-physiological effects

Participants identified the following benefits of humour in facilitating learning: humour helps people to cope with stress, tension and anxiety, stimulate the release of endorphins; alleviates depression and enhances the well-being of learners.

Humour helps cope with stress, tension and anxiety

Irrespective of the cause of stress, tension and anxiety, learning becomes inhibited. Participants indicated that, when used appropriately, humour assists learners to cope with problems as evidenced by the citation. One participant remarked: *“We come to class with huge family or personal problems, but the use of humour enables us to cope despite all these (hmm and nodding – others agree)”*. According to the participants, a break in the form of humour provides an opportunity to relax and take in new information. Participants acknowledged that the nursing curriculum is very packed and that could contribute to the anxiety they are experiencing, as they fear failure. A participant highlighted: *“It is easier to study or learn more if you are happy than when you are sad and stressed. . . and when happy you enjoy what you are doing hence you do not feel the workload”*. Humour is a major psychological tool (Check, 1997) that helps students cope with stress. It enhances their sense of well-being, and boosts their self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence, as well as alleviating anxiety and depression. Check (1997) states that sometimes laughter is the best medicine.

Humour stimulates the release of endorphins

Research in humour physiology has been conducted and reveals that when positive emotions are elicited through humour, the sympathetic nervous system is stimulated, resulting in increased heartbeat and deep respiration, allowing for strong blood flow to the brain. As one’s brain receives more oxygenated blood, an increased sense of arousal and alertness occurs (Tortora and Derrickson, 2010). It is this pleasant emotional response evoked by the perception of humour that leads to an increased positive effect (Martin, 2007).

Pleasure causes the release of endorphins which influence feelings and thinking, creating a state of alertness and increased memory (Fry, 2002). Endorphins are a group of substances in the nervous system that forms part of a larger group of morphine-like compounds called opioids. Opioids help relieve pain and stress, thus promoting a feeling of well-being (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1995, Volume 6).

The release of dopamine within the limbic system of the brain explains the pleasure felt when a learner gets a joke. Research studies on the benefits of laughter show that humour enhances students' health by alleviating pain and psychological discomfort (Check, 1997). Laughter stimulates the cerebral cortex of the brain that improves mental and physical health. Laughing causes the diaphragm to massage the right side of the heart, which releases endorphins, a natural painkiller (Check, 1997). In support of this view, Garner (2006) believes that, physiologically, humour and laughter can aid learning through improved respiration, lower pulse rate and blood pressure, exercise of the chest muscle, greater oxygenation of blood and the release of endorphins into the blood stream. The implication is that it is imperative that learners find meaning in the humour which makes them laugh so that their mental alertness is kept high. This enables them to connect the humour to their existing conception for meaningful learning to take place.

Humour alleviates depression and enhances the well-being of learners

The nurse educator is responsible for creating a physical and psychological learning environment that is stimulating and enjoyable. Learners are sensitive to embarrassing and depressive situations, especially when these situations are carried out in front of other learners in class as indicated by the following remark by a participant: *“Lecturer X likes making racist jokes which are directed at certain racial groups. I don't get the humour in the joke, it depresses and demotivates me, I check the timetable and if I realise that it is that particular lecturer's period, I feel like not going to class at all”*. Stress and anxiety interfere with the ability to learn, but depression is a state of feeling sad, a serious medical condition in which a person experiences a feeling of despondency, dejection, and desolation. A person feels hopeless and unimportant and is unable to live in a normal way (Online Merriam Webster Dictionary). The implication of reaching a state of depression is that the learner may be demotivated to the point of terminating the programme or losing interest and becoming an at-risk learner. The worst scenario is when

the learner moves from mild to severe depression that warrants hospitalisation. Penson, Partridge, Rudd, Seiden, Nelson, Chabner and Lynch (2005) are of the opinion that laughter is the best medicine in stressful situations. Humour should never be used in a way that belittles a learner or creates negativity to the class atmosphere. This confirms the value of building humour capacity in nursing learners to use in their practice so as to improve the psychological well-being of patients.

Social effect of humour

The following social aspects of humour emerged from participants: (a) humour establishes professional relationships, (b) humour as an ice breaker and lastly (c) humour creates a relaxed non-threatening learning environment.

Humour establishes professional relationships

Socialisation is a fundamental didactic principle to promote learning (Fraser, Loubster and van Rooyen, 1993). Socialisation is defined as the individual's adaptation to his physical, psychological and social environment through interaction with other people. One participant stated: "*Humour builds a joyous relationship between the lecturer and the learner. A lecturer who uses humour is respected, whereas those who do not, are feared. When you think of an authoritarian teacher, you end up not wanting to attend or to consult, but when you think of a teacher who will make teaching fun, you anticipate attending the lecture*". Scanlan and Chernomas (1997) contend that lecturers cannot engage in a reflective humorous relationship with learners unless they give up their positions as authoritative knowers. The authors suggest that the lecturer work together with learners to uncover each other's tacit meanings of the experiences. In this relationship, learners and teachers interact to discover the meaning of learning situations together. This paradigm shift of teachers giving up control in the relationship with learners should be modelled so that learners can model the same relationship with peers and beyond the classroom environment to the clinical settings (Scanlan and Chernomas, 1997).

The affective-social climate pertains to, among other things, how the educator and the learners relate to and interact with each other. This climate is further explained as a climate in which learners experience safety, trust, acceptance,

respect, support, connectedness and satisfaction (Gravett, 2005). A safe humorous environment allows learners to air their views without any constraints or feeling threatened. Sharing humour and laughter is indicative of togetherness and creates a positive emotional social atmosphere conducive to the feeling of safety. Several studies support the findings that humour improves the relationship between learners and their teacher (Ulloth, 2003) and (Aylor and Opplinger, 2003). According to Chauvet and Hofmeyer (2007), a professional relationship between the teacher and the learners is characterised by being safe, open, relaxed, humorous, flexible, exciting, informal, professional and respectful. This implies that the lecturer and learners should uphold these values in order to facilitate and make learning enjoyable rather than the lecturer being feared and unapproachable.

Humour is an ice breaker

Humour has a positive effect on learning, as it draws the learners' attention and makes them want to listen. Participants stated: *"If I have to listen to a lecturer talking endlessly without breaking the ice, I get bored and fall asleep when the lecturer just give a bunch of facts in a monotonous voice, but when jokes are integrated I want to listen more"*. Participants indicated that ice breakers enable them to relate content to what they already know. They agree that ice breaking strategies are funny and can be utilised to facilitate understanding. The following was stated: *"When you start your lecture, do not start with what you are going to teach, start with whatever is happening in the community or in the news that is interesting"*. Others reiterated: *"Ice breaking humour must be done at the beginning of the lesson and in-between especially during double periods where we get tired"*.

According to Restiano (2011) and Bowman (2009), the attention span of adult learners ranges between eight to ten minutes after which the brain begins to lose focus. This is reiterated by Reardon (in Gravett 2005), who remarks that learning is enhanced when one interrupts it for two to five minutes in order to process information. Learners mentioned strategies such as ice breakers, cartoons and verbal jokes as strategies which give them a break from all the work. This implies that the brain needs time to process the information and therefore making a verbal joke may provide such time.

Humour creates a relaxed non-threatening learning environment

The lecturer is responsible for creating an enabling learning environment that embraces democratic values such as freedom to express one's feelings and thoughts (Birbeck and Andre, 2009). Humour sets the tone for a more relaxed atmosphere which in turn creates a positive climate conducive to learning (Pollak and Freda, 1997). The environment should make the learners want to learn and the use of humour is perceived as a psychological tool that can help learners cope with stress and anxiety (Check, 1997).

Participants acknowledged the fact that the nursing curriculum is packed and difficult to understand due to the difficult medical jargon used, and this creates a lot of anxiety and uncertainty as to whether they will successfully learn the content therefore explanation of difficult concepts in the form of humour provides an opportunity to relax and understand the difficult content. Ulloth (2002) contends that some nursing subjects are difficult and threatening to the learners sometimes, and if teachers present the content in a rigid manner with a serious disposition, learners become intimidated. The solution to this problem is to integrate humour when teaching to lower stress levels of learners and hopefully make the learning content less threatening, more palatable and more memorable. A participant highlighted: *“It is easier to study or learn more if you are happy than when sad. . . and when you are happy you enjoy what you are doing hence you do not feel the workload”*.

Where there is anxiety, the brain does not accept information (Check, 1997). This perspective is supported by Story and Butts (2010), and Jensen (2008), who argue that humour reduces learning anxiety and learners learn more when not feeling threatened. A positive non-threatening environment has a positive influence on learners' emotions, which in turn impacts positively on the cognitive stimulation. This means that learners feel free to deliberately engage each other and seek clarity where necessary (Birbeck and Andre, 2009). Such engagement is facilitated by a non-threatening environment as mentioned by Gravett (2005, p.44): *“A non-threatening learning climate is consequently crucial in promoting meaningful learning”*. Cognisance must be taken that it is not only the use of humour that can create a conducive learning environment, many factors and approaches such as cooperative and reflective learning can produce such an environment (Carver, 2013).

Cognitive effects

The development of the learner's intellectual ability entails not only his ability to memorise information and to recall it again at a later stage, but also to capture the learner's attention and to execute a variety of complicated cognitive tasks such as understanding, reasoning, processing of new information, simplifying difficult concepts, integrating theory and practice, making correct association, using divergent thinking and creativity. The following cognitive effects of humour were identified by participants: (a) humour facilitates comprehension, (b) and humour assists in problem-solving situations.

Humour facilitates comprehension

Comprehension is a cognitive activity whereby the learner is not only able to recall but is able to grasp the meaning of information or situations. The use of humour in facilitating learning helps the learner better understand the content as it becomes simpler for them. The related sub-themes that emerged included: humour facilitates the processing of new information, simplifying difficult concepts, and making meaningful associations.

Processing of new information

Learners' receptivity to information alone does not necessarily demonstrate understanding. It merely demonstrates an acceptance of and preference for learning as part of the learner's value system. As learning becomes part of the learner's value system, the learner wants not only to be in a fun class, but also to be able to successfully process the content. Participants remarked: "*Humour gives us a chance to digest what had just been taught and we laugh and it is easier for us to remember or formulate new information*". This is because learning does not refer to receiving and recording pre-packaged information and storing it for later retrieval; it is an active process through which one constructs meaning and transforms understandings (Gravett, 2005). Meaning-making is a process in which one actively constructs one's own knowledge using a pre-existing cognitive structure as a frame of reference.

This means that one has to actively process the information to allow meaningful learning to occur. According to Chabeli (2008) and Carver (2013), when an educator tells a joke related to the content, learners must first recognise and interpret the joke being told by using their own pre-existing

conception of the world as a frame. Once this incongruity is resolved, construction of new meaning and own understanding results. Understanding is one of the processes involved in effective and meaningful learning. This process transforms, either by enriching or revising one's conceptions (Gravett, 2005). According to Dormann and Biddle (2006), humour helps learners construct their own understanding.

Simplifying difficult concepts

Difficult concepts become meaningless to the learner, thus making it even more difficult to master complicated or secondary concepts. Participants indicated: *"Nursing uses difficult words, but if the tutor explain or act them out in the form of a joke, it makes sense and we then understand"*. They further acknowledged that through comic role play, learner participation is enhanced: *"Encourage learners to humorously play the role of how substances such as histamine interact with receptors to produce an allergic response in the body. The learners must continue to demonstrate how a histamine antagonist reverses the effects of histamine"*. In order for the learning content to be meaningful, not only is the use of humour of the essence (Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, 2010) but meaningful organisation of the content to be role played becomes necessary (Fraser, Loubser and Van Rooy, 1993; Carl, 2002). The educator must incorporate humourous activities when an understanding of difficult concepts is needed, for example, allowing learners to role-play the mechanism of action or the side effects of drugs in a funny way. However, the educator must ensure that all medical terms and their translations and transcriptions are well understood beforehand. Once all role players have learnt their roles, they could be asked to creatively decide on how to act their roles. Animated, humourous role-playing by the learners themselves will enable them to construct their own understanding, which may make it possible for them to simplify difficult concepts.

Making meaningful associations

The ability to form correct associations leads to learning. One participant recalled: *"A lecturer who used a funny puppet film to demonstrate the effect of obesity on the functioning of the heart made the content easier by this meaningful association."* The participant further stated that *"Even though we laughed loudly; we could make meaningful association of the effect of obesity on the heart"*. According to the theory of association (Fraser, Loubser and Van Rooy 1993), meaningful association can be achieved by selecting the humourous stimuli most suited to the content and conveyed to the learners in the form of films or cartoon pictures. Information-processing theory,

postulates that, both visual (funny picture) and auditory (scenario) stimuli are coded by sensory register as images and sound patterns respectively (Woolfolk, 2010). Once the information is coded in the sensory register, the brain forms perceptions in which the information is categorised and regrouped through pattern discrimination using existing knowledge as a frame of reference. The ability to retrieve prior learning or experiences when feeling positive is higher than when not, because strategies that trigger positive emotions in learners allow the brain to tag the learning experience as important and thus it is able to make connections and better perceptual maps for better understanding (Jensen, 2008).

Humour assists in problem-solving situations

Problem solving can be defined as any situation in which some information is known and other information is needed. It can engage learners in seeking knowledge, processing information, and applying ideas to real world situations, and it has the potential to motivate learners and show them practical reasons for learning. The lecturer can use humourous teaching strategies in order to develop the learners thinking and reasoning skills that is: their ability to analyse situations, to apply their existing knowledge to new situations, to recognise the difference between facts and opinions, and to make objective judgments (Van der Horst and McDonald, 1997). According to the participants problem-solving requires; divergent and creative thinking, and promote theory and practice integration.

Promote creative and divergent thinking

Creativity is a fundamental ingredient in finding alternatives by problem-solving and generates originality. Typical characteristics of creativity are: fluency of ideas, elaboration on ideas by going beyond the obvious and including new dimensions (Van der Horst and McDonald, 1997). One participant suggested, “*Humour help us to generate ideas and be creative and imaginative.*”

Divergent thinking is an important element in creativity which involves scientific discovery and artistic creation as its defining characteristics (Koestler, in Martin, 2007). These terms are seen as a switch in perspective, or a new way of looking at things which enhances problem solving of a situation (Martin, 2007). It is the positive emotions stimulated by one’s funny personal experience recounted in the form of a story that facilitates the

generation of new information by transforming external information to fit what one already knows (Fiedler, 2001). Funny stories help the learner to move beyond the classroom and look at the problem in a broader perspective. This means that humour in this instance makes the learners reconstruct their own understanding of a funny story being told by someone else. These are believable stories that make learners conscious of the reality of what to expect in the clinical setting. Learners develop divergent thinking because humour goes beyond the obvious to seek new ways of looking at things (De Bono, 1973). When learners are able to resolve the incongruity of humorous stimuli, it indicates flexibility in thinking, thus enabling them to relate to and integrate divergent learning material or course content (Isen, Daubman and Nowicki, in Martin 2007). It is important to integrate positive emotions, as they foster a learner's ability to think creatively and derive personal meaning (Prigge, 2002).

Promote theory and practice integration

The primary purpose of facilitation of teaching and learning in nursing education is to enable learners to apply what they have learnt in clinical situations. When in the clinical area, learners are afforded the opportunity to transfer knowledge to practical situations that they encounter. The purpose of educational programmes is to produce a learner with applied competence. Within the South African National Qualification Framework model, applied competence refers to the learner's ability to integrate concepts, ideas and actions in an authentic real-life context. Applied competence constitutes practical, foundational and reflexive competencies.

According to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA Act no 58 of 1995) foundational competence refers to the learner's ability to demonstrate the knowledge and thinking that underpin the action taken. This implies that the facilitation of learning using strategies such as acting out in a humorous way as described above can assist the learner to acquire foundational competence which forms the basis for practical competence. If learners know what they are doing and why they are doing it, they are more likely to acquire the ability to perform certain tasks or actions in real-life situations. The educator's role in this instance is to assess the learner's performance and give feedback to enable integration of performance with understanding, thus serving as a connection between the cognitive and psycho-motor domains in order to adapt to a situation at any point in time, referred to as reflexive competence. This integration can be facilitated by use of humour as noted by one participant: "*The process of third stage of labour is quite complicated but*

when we were taught how to help the woman in labour to ease pain, the lecturer did the rocking from side to side, singing funny rhymes, . . . it was quite fun. Now we remember what to do when a woman is in labour."

According to De Young (2009), meaningful transfer of learning is therefore not complete without the ability to use knowledge. New knowledge should bring about change in behaviour that makes the difference in the patient's condition. Barnett and Ceci (in De Young 2009), are of the opinion that successful transfer depends on, among other things, the way in which the material was taught and learned. One participant stated: "*I recall how participating in a humorous role play in which I acted the role of a democratic sister, with my peers acting out other leadership styles, enabled me to demonstrate what I had learnt into practice regarding types of leadership in real life situations*". Humorous play-acting of leadership styles by learners should be made as close to reality as possible. When learners are able to see the similarity between what they are learning in class and what they practically do in a clinical setting, learning becomes possible, thus reducing the gap between theory and practice (Barnett and Ceci, in De Young, 2009). Educators must therefore think deeply about humorous approaches that best address learners' learning concerns.

Negative effects of humour

It was found that learners experienced not only the positive effects of humour, but its negative effects as well. The negative effect mentioned by participants was that humour used inappropriately hinders learning. Two sub-themes emerged concerning negative effects, namely: too much humour detracts learners from learning, and racist jokes result in a loss of interest in learning.

Too much humour distracts learners from learning

The use of too much unrelated humour detracts learners from learning in particular for achievement-orientated learners who concentrate on what counts and avoids acts that waste time (Quinn and Hughes, 2013). Participants referred to the fact that when humour is used inappropriately, for example using too much humour as in engaging in a relentless string of jokes not related to the content, learning is negatively affected. In other words,

learners lose focus on the course objectives because, the teacher concentrates more on the jokes. Participants indicated: *“Incompetent lecturers like to buy time by using a series of jokes until the period ends. Such lecturers cannot be taken seriously. This is attributed to the fact that the lecturer tends to talk about humorous things rather than concentrating on teaching the content”*. Participants went on to say that humour is a good thing: *“Unless the lecturer is hiding incompetency, however when a test is to be set, the same lecturer asks complicated questions which were not taught. Lecturers should not replace the content with a series of jokes and hide behind jokes”*. The implication is that learners may see class attendance as a waste of time (Lei, Cohen and Russler, 2010). This means that the use of too much humour affects the educator’s credibility and may lead to a lack of trust.

Learners’ perception of an educator as incompetent destroys the trust and respect, which in turn negatively impacts on the affective social climate necessary for educator credibility. Due to lack of respect for an educator, there may be increased noise levels in the class, which gets out of control, wasting time that could have been used effectively. This atmosphere hinders learning and is destructive as the humour is not fulfilling its intended purpose (Carver, 2013). Appropriate moderate humour is recommended, as too much diminishes its effect (Story and Butts, 2010).

Racist jokes result in a loss of interest in learning

Racism is a form of prejudice. Educators who use racist jokes create distrust in learners. When differences are obvious, distrust becomes greater (The World Book Encyclopedia International, 1995, Vol. 16, p.52). Participants remarked: *“Lecturer X likes making racist jokes which are directed at certain racial groups and therefore creates lots of mistrust in the learning environment. Another stated: “If you keep getting those nasty comments especially made in a language not understood by all learners, we feel very disrespected and demotivated with a very low self-esteem”*. The results showed that participants experienced racist jokes that were directed at certain racial groups. These jokes made learners lose interest in the subject and in learning. Learners then distance themselves from learning activities. Humour that is targeted at individuals or groups is said to be disparaging, for example, targeting a particular racist or ethnic group. This type of humour is classified as inappropriate, as it offends others (Wanzer, Wojtaszczyk and Smith, 2006)

A racist joke that is offensive and threatening to the learner's core sense of identity results in anger and social distancing (Refaie, 2011). This finding is supported by Englert (2010) who argues that if the humour is not suitable or offends learners' racial standing, the result may be social distancing and isolation from their counterparts. If humour is used inappropriately, it can cause divisiveness (Hall 2001, in Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, 2011). These learners feel side-lined, and therefore develop decreased motivation to process course content. According to Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, (2010), the negative effect generated by inappropriate humour, creates a negative emotion which in turn hinders learning.

The negative emotion that learners claim to experience when racist jokes or belittling remarks are passed includes feeling bad and, offended and having low self-esteem. Any humorous attempt that leaves one feeling belittled does not conform to the expected classroom norms and standards, especially if stated by an authoritative figure like an educator (Wanzer, Wojtaszczyk and Smith, 2006). The results of this study indicated that learners experienced an attack on their personal worth and self-esteem when the educator jokingly uttered nasty remarks and comments under the false pretence of being funny.

It is recommended that educators should conform to the accepted classroom norms and to role-model the type of communication required of the learners. Educators must re-examine their own communication skills and reflect on their own teaching by ensuring a periodic feedback from learners about their inclusion of humour in the classroom. They must revisit the purpose of using humour as an educational strategy and refrain from using humour that targets learners.

The use of humour must facilitate the connection between the educator and the learner and not divide them (Chiasson, in Mantooth, 2010). This can only be achieved if the humour is used appropriately with no belittling remarks and racist jokes targeting other learners. Appropriate humour builds sound relationships between the lecturer and learner, and can be used as an educational vehicle to identify where support is needed. The ideal way would be to integrate humour that fosters a sense of openness and respect between learners and the educator (Shibinski and Martin, 2010).

The effects of absence of humour

This study focuses on the experiences of learner nurses on the effects of humour in facilitating learning, but the absence of humour also emerged as having an influence on learning. An absence of humour creates a tense learning environment, resulting in decreased learner participation.

Absence of humour creates a tense learning environment

Educators who are known by learners to be humourless, serious and rigid, create uncertainty and confusion when they attempt to use humour to draw the learners' attention. One participant remarked: "*Learners do not know whether to laugh or not and even get scared to do so because the educator has never joked with them before. One may not know the motive of sudden use of humour*". Kelly (2005) indicated that some educators consider their jobs too serious. Integrating humour into their teaching would appear inappropriate or unprofessional, and they therefore resort to not using humour in their teaching. Participants remarked: "*We get bored in a classroom without humour and end up sleeping due to boredom as the mind begin to wander. In other words, one's attention is directed at something else*". According to Bowman (2009), when one listens to uninteresting information, the brain starts to create its own internal world, due to lack of stimulation. Absence of stimulation refers to lack of emotional involvement: for example, listening to the same monotonous voice with no element of surprise or interest. As Wolfe (in Bowman, 2009, p.30) puts it, "the brain normally becomes so accustomed to the stimulus that it ignores it". This means that the attention is no longer focused on learning, but is elsewhere, which is not conducive to learning. According to participants, a lesson without humour is not only boring but the atmosphere becomes tense and does not automatically permit learners to ask questions. The fear arises from not knowing how the lecturer will react due to his or her serious nature and disposition.

Participants verbalised: "*Those who are so serious and do not incorporate humour in teaching demonstrates their authoritative position*". Story and Butts (2010) noted that this type of educational experience is oppressive and places students in spectator roles instead of them becoming inspired by an interactive process of co-learning. Seemingly, in this instance, learners are not inspired. The approach that focuses on rigid presentation of the subject within

an allocated time is a teacher-centred traditional approach to teaching and learning and contributes to learner passiveness. Once the purpose of incorporating humour to content has been identified, one does not have to try too hard to make the content interesting, since one can use the kind of humour that suits one's personality (Narula, Chaudhary, Agarwal and Narula, 2011; Shibinski and Martin, 2010).

Recommendations

The following recommendations were adapted from Wanzer, Wojtaszczyk and Smith (2006): an educator who is not comfortable with being a source of humour will benefit from using other types of humorous content, e.g. cartoons, animations and funny videos. Those who are not comfortable with any type of humour should consider using verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviours such as smiling, laughing, vocal variety and amusing gestures. Educators that are novices in using humour must observe those who actively use humour to share in best practices. It is advisable to have a collection of humorous jokes from the internet or any other source. Staff development departments must include regular development sessions to train educators on using electronic media to find and extract humour-related material. It is therefore recommended that educators be introduced to the benefits of the use of humour in the class, and the effects of its absence. This instruction must include the consequences of the use of inappropriate humour. It is also recommended that research-based guidelines for the integration of humour to facilitate learning be developed.

Implications

The realisation that the facilitation of learning through humour is another fun way to educate, is not to be misused, as time lost cannot be regained. Too much humour wastes time and distracts learners from focusing on course objectives. Using humour does not mean that an educator lacks discipline and cannot exercise proper classroom management or control. The responsibility and power to ensure class control and discipline is vested in the educator irrespective of the teaching approach used. Therefore, nurse educators need to be made aware of the negative effects as well as the effect of the absence of humour. It is necessary to adhere to a time schedule when incorporating

humorous strategies, in order to ensure effective time management. This can be done by planning the use of humour in advance, during the preparation of a lesson, so as to effectively incorporate it into the content.

Conclusion

Educators who fear using humour in their teaching might not be aware of the benefits of humour to learning and thus deny learners and themselves an opportunity of creating an enjoyable learning environment that facilitates understanding and retention through humour. There is a need for such educators to emulate those that are humour-oriented, and to get the feel of the use of humour. This will help them realise that their job does not have to be too serious and that they too can use humour and still be appropriate and professional. It is understood that not all educators are humour-oriented and that it is not only through humour that a conducive learning environment can be created. Educators who are not humour-oriented must first be made aware of the benefits of humour to learning. Secondly, they must be assisted in determining the purpose for the use of humour, and how humour can be integrated into the content to enhance understanding. Research-based guidelines could be of assistance in this regard (Garner, 2006).

It is also recommended that a similar study be replicated to validate the findings in other nursing education contexts. This will enhance the transferability of the findings to other educational institutions.

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Mary Chabeli
Jackie Malesela
Monica Rasepae
Nursing Department
University of Johannesburg

maryc@uj.ac.za

jackiem@uj.ac.za

rasepae@tiscali.co.za